

The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock

T.S. Eliot, 1915

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
Ma percioche giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a *patient etherized upon a table*;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering *retreats*
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a *tedious* argument
Of *insidious intent*
To lead you to an overwhelming question ...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of *Michelangelo*.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its *muzzle* on the window-panes,
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,

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1. From Dante's *Divina Commedia: Inferno* as Dante (a pilgrim traveling through Hell) speaks to the spirits in the Inferno: "If I thought that my reply were given to anyone who might return to the world, this flame would stand forever still; but since never from this deep place has anyone returned alive, if what I hear is true, without fear of infamy I answer thee."
 2. Etherize — to anesthetize with ether (ie, put someone to sleep for surgery)
 3. Retreat — to go back, to withdraw oneself
 4. Tedious — monotonous, painstakingly long
 5. Michaelangelo — Italian Renaissance painter (famous for painting in the Vatican's Sistine Chapel)
 6. Muzzle — nose and mouth of an animal (ie, a cat)
 7. Linger — to wait, to stay because of reluctance to leave, to be slow to disappear

Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, *there will be time*
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair —
(They will say: "How his hair is growing thin!")
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —
(They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!")

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8. (Famous reference) from Ecclesiastes in the Bible: Chapter 3: "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain, a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace."

Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and *revisions* which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I *presume*?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
The eyes that fix you in a *formulated* phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and *wriggling* on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so *digress*?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in *shirt-sleeves*, leaning out of windows? ...

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9. Revisions — edits, to reconsider and change or edit (writing or a plan)
 10. Presume — to assume something is true based on probability -or- to dare to do something, to be bold enough to act
 11. Formulated — constructed, created or devised systematically
 12. Wriggle — to squirm, to twist and turn to try to free one's self
 13. Digress — to become distracted, to leave the main point and discuss or consider other semi-related topics
 14. Shirt-sleeves (old) — wearing one's button down shirt without a jacket or vest

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep ... tired ... or it *malingers*,
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
Should I, after tea and cakes and *ices*,
Have the strength to force the moment to its *crisis*?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen *my head* (grown slightly bald) *brought in upon a platter*,
I am no prophet — and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the *eternal Footman* hold my coat, and *snicker*,
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming question,
To say: "*I am Lazarus, come from the dead*,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—
If one, settling a pillow by her head
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all;

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15. Scuttle — to move with short, quick footsteps (makes a soft clattering sound)
 16. Malinger — to feign or pretend illness
 17. Ices — ice cream
 18. Crisis — climax, ultimate moment of distress
 19. Head brought in upon a platter — Reference to the Gospels: John the Baptist (prophet and cousin of Jesus) was beheaded at the request of Herod's step-daughter Salome, and his head was brought to her on a silver platter after she danced for Herod.
 20. the Eternal Footman — a common personification of Death (ie, the Grim Reaper), an apparition that signals someone will die
 21. snicker — to laugh quietly and mockingly
 22. Lazarus — Reference to either 1— Lazarus the friend of Jesus and brother of Mary & Martha who Jesus raised from the dead, or, 2—the Parable of Lazarus the rich man, who died and burned in hell and begged Jesus to let him come from the dead and warn his relatives about hell (Jesus declines this offer, saying that if they don't believe the signs on earth, they also won't believe Lazarus' ghost's warnings)

That is not it, at all.”

And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while,
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—

And this, and so much more?—
It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
“That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all.”

No! I am not *Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be*;
Am an *attendant* lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and *meticulous*;
Full of high sentence, but a bit *obtuse*;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—
Almost, at times, the Fool.

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23. Prince Hamlet, from the Shakespeare play Hamlet, famous for asking “To be or not to be,” ie, to keep living or to kill himself in his speech:

*To be, or not to be- that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them. To die- to sleep-
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to. ‘*

24. Attendant — subordinate helper
25. Deferential — respectful, humble, submissive
26. Meticulous — paying careful attention to detail
27. Full of high sentence — full of fancy and grandiose diction (word choice)
28. Obtuse — unintelligent

I grow old ... I grow old ...
I shall wear the bottoms of my *trousers* rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the *mermaids* singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls *wreathed* with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

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29. Trousers — pants
30. Mermaids (also, sea-girls) — mythical creatures, half-woman half-fish (women with fish tails); could reference Homer's *Odyssey* where the Sirens (mermaids) sing to the sailors to deceive them into getting too close to the rocky islands where they get caught, shipwrecked, and eventually drown.
31. Wreath — to adorn with flowers or leaves
32. Don't worry if you didn't understand everything. Often, Eliot uses unusual and strange language combinations in order to create certain images in your mind. Focus on the images that Eliot creates. There are many interpretations of the poem, and we'll talk more in class. There's no single right "answer," but there are a couple explanations.